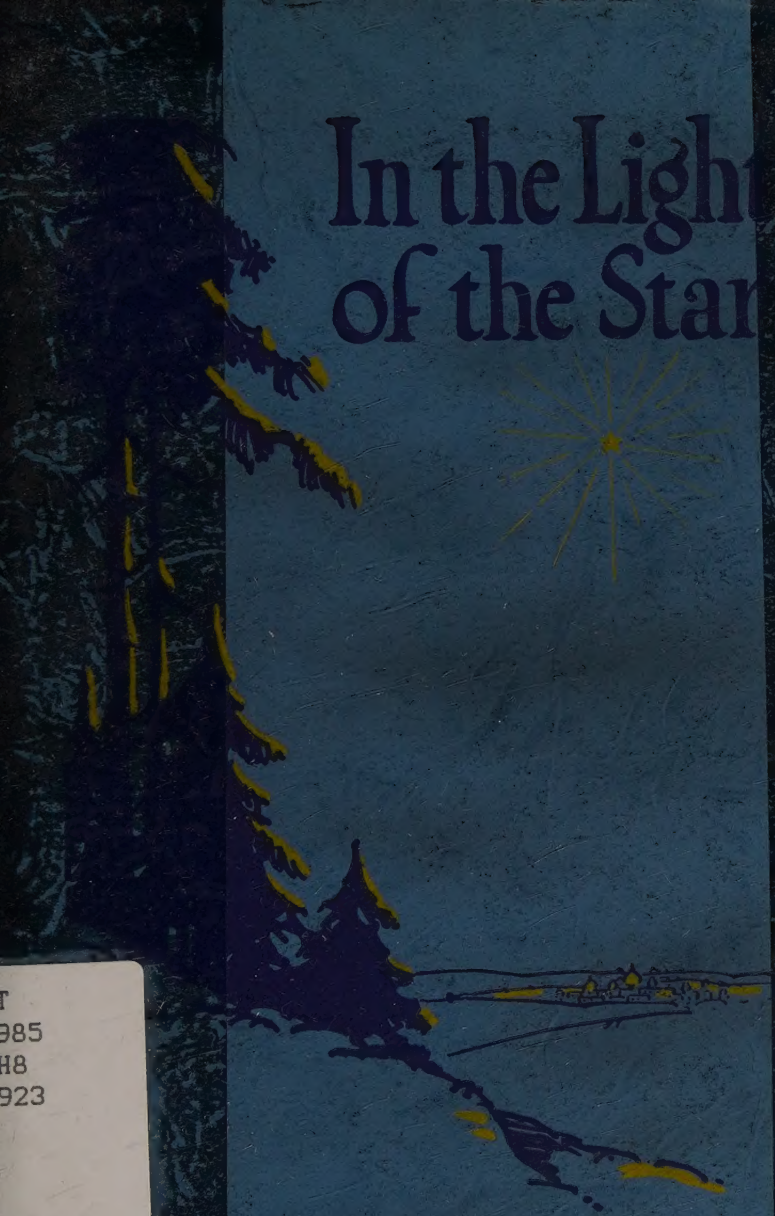
In the Light of the Star



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E gather now 'round Yuletide fire
And thoughts range wide to friend and kin.
For you we wish the Season's Cheer;
Bright glow of health, warm clasp of hand,
High courage for the coming year.

"NOW WHEN JESUS WAS BORN IN BETHLEHEM OF JUDAEA IN THE DAYS OF HEROD THE KING, BEHOLD, THERE CAME WISE MEN FROM THE EAST TO JERUSALEM, SAYING, WHERE IS HE THAT IS BORN KING OF THE JEWS? FOR WE HAVE SEEN HIS STAR IN THE EAST, AND ARE COME TO WORSHIP HIM."

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By

J. B. HUNLEY

CINCINNATI, OHIO
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IN THE LIGHT OF THE STAR

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I

THE BEGINNING OF A LONG QUEST

ERMAS lived in the city of Rome. Not far from his humble dwelling the yellow waters of the Tiber rolled onward to mingle with the sea. Daily he crossed the great bridges spanning the stream, which flowed through the city. Here he had played as a boy, and from travellers and soldiers had heard strange stories of the world beyond, for it was a time of many journeys and adventures. From his throne on the Palatine Hill Caesar Augustus ruled the world, and his legions guarded the frontiers of the Empire from Britain in the west to the valley of the far Euphrates, beyond the vast reaches of the trackless desert. Along highways never surpassed for strength and beauty, leading into Rome from all lands of the earth and ending at the Forum, there came caravans of strange peoples to mingle in the mightiest of cities. Ships of the emperor guarded the coasts of the Mediterranean, and great merchantmen brought their cargoes

of wealth to supply the demands of a city known in all the world for its splendor and magnificence.

Hermas had never journeyed far from the gates of his own city. Though born of lowly parentage, he had been well reared and given opportunities unusual to a youth of his station. He was an only child and greatly beloved of his parents. His father, a member of the palace guard, had for years served in the city, and ties of the deepest affection bound together the members of the little family.

But a new and trying situation was facing Hermas. One year before the events herein related, his father had been sent to join a Roman legion in the East. Soon after reaching his post of service he wrote that he was stationed in the city of Jerusalem. For months Hermas and his mother, who was a frail woman, waited in vain for another message. Heartbroken over the absence of her husband and brooding over the probable ill that had befallen him, the little woman finally died, and Hermas was left alone in the world.

After burying his mother Hermas returned to his silent dwelling, but it was no longer home to him. He could not endure the oppressive silence and the objects that brought

only memories of the days forever gone. He withdrew to the banks of the Tiber and gazed once more upon its turbid waters. He was reminded of the stream of life moving out to the boundless deep. The mystery of it all he could not fathom. He had reached the age of twenty; life was before him; his love of adventure was strong; he would move out into the strange world of which he had heard so much. But above all else was his purpose to go in quest of his father, of whose love and faithfulness he was fully persuaded, and, at any cost, to learn of the fate that had befallen him.

A few days only sufficed to settle his affairs. Arrangements were made to sail on the next ship leaving for Syria. With his father he had several times visited the port of Puteoli, where ships of all lands unloaded their cargoes and passengers for Rome, and from which they departed to all ports of the Great Sea. It was with a different feeling that he now set out to that city, and when at last he stood upon the deck of the ship which was to bear him far away, emotions too deep for words welled up in his heart. The ship cast off her moorings, and, with sails unfurled, moved gracefully out upon the bosom of the deep. Hermas watched

the shores of his native land fade from view. His heart was heavy at the thought of his mother's sorrow and decease. He looked out over the broad expanse of the heaving sea upon which he would be tossed for many days and felt the spell of its mysterious power. He felt that the sea was calling to him, calling to the deeps of his being, and he was trying to answer, but he could not define his thoughts or give them expression. In that hour he sensed a deeper mystery in himself than in the ocean about him. He longed for some one who knew the mysteries of life and death to discover to him the meaning of his own emotions. He had studied the great teachers and philosophers of his own nation, but they had not unveiled the meaning of life. Their teachings, vague and indefinite, were pervaded by a fear which seemed to hold them in bondage.

Hermas was alone in the world. Like the Tiber, his life had moved within certain limits but had now reached the ocean and was unconfined. A sense of dread came over him as he thought of what the future might hold. Westward the sea over which the ship had sailed was ablaze with the afterglow of the sun which had just set in the clear sky of the late autumn day. In the east a purple mist was rising from

the deep. Hermas lifted his eyes heavenward and discerned, high above the ship, a stork pursuing its solitary flight to its winter home far to the south. What power gave this bird its unerring instinct to cross mountains, oceans and deserts, alone but never lost? If some higher power guided its flight through the pathless sky, could he, a young man, be utterly alone, and could he err in following the noblest impulse of his soul? He would hold himself to the highest and welcome whatever light might come to guide him on his way. He would go to Jerusalem and seek his father among the Roman soldiers stationed there. He would learn the full truth of what had occurred before deciding upon a course for his own life.

It was late in the season for ships to be out on the Great Sea. Most of them had sought winter havens. Only a few of the larger and more venturesome, with cargoes for promising markets or passengers bent on urgent missions, had risked the dangers of the deep. But the season was mild and the voyage uneventful. Days passed; the sun rose and set in glory; the moon made a silver pathway across the deep; the stars in nightly procession moved across the heavens, and by these the ship was

held to her course. The delay occasioned by putting in at Corinth and Ephesus, ports off the direct line of the voyage, was irksome to Hermas, who wished to lose no time. And yet the days spent in these ports were not without profit, since he had long desired to visit the land whose civilization had once conquered the world.

At length, one bright morning, Hermas, standing with his fellow-passengers on the deck of the ship, saw in the distance the shoreline of Phoenicia and then the far-famed city of Tyre, in whose harbor lay ships of every nation. Once on shore, Hermas mingled with many strange people as he had done in his native Rome, for hither, too, came pilgrims from Alexandria, Carthage, Tarshish, Ephesus and the many islands of the Great Sea. Not the sight of strange people, but the feeling that he was far from the land of his birth deeply moved Hermas. And yet it was a comfort to know that he was traversing the route his father had travelled a year before. The hope that he might soon secure information about his father, that would set his mind at rest, lured him forward with haste.

It was not difficult for the young man to find the way to Jerusalem: there was much travel

in the direction of the city of which he had heard so much. He joined a caravan which moved south through Galilee. He saw Mount Hermon in the north, lifting its snow-covered peak above the clouds. From the winding pathway over the lofty hills he caught glimpses of the blue Sea of Galilee and of the myriad boats upon its surface. Beyond the deep ravine of the Jordan Valley the hills of Gilead formed the barrier to that desert whose burning sands stretched to far Babylonia. He pressed forward and passed Bethshean, refreshed himself at Jacob's Well, saw green fields spread out like a carpet around Mount Gerizim, touched Shiloh and Bethel,—names unknown, and therefore without significance to Hermas, but which would afterwards be rich with meaning.

At last, coming to the summit of Scopus, the caravan paused, and Hermas beheld one of the great sights of all time—Jerusalem from the hills. It lay spread out before him, surrounded by great walls. Its domes and towers and minarets glistened in the pure light of a beautiful morning. Yonder on Moriah stood the great Temple of Herod, a marvel of architectural achievement. Hermas, familiar with the renowned buildings of his native city, was, never-

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theless, deeply moved at the wonder before him. He had never dreamed that a people so despised could produce a city of such magnificence.

As he entered the city through the Damascus Gate he noticed in the streets groups of people in excited attitudes. He had learned in distant Rome that Judaea was noted for outbursts of passion and violence. His father had been sent with a detachment to reinforce the garrison of Roman soldiers stationed in the city. With an iron hand Rome preserved order among the populace. And yet there were times when the guard was almost overpowered. What if his father had met with violence at the hands of some insurrectionist? Hermas shuddered as he thought of the probability. "Surely there must be some unusual cause for such commotion," thought he, as he gazed about him. Soldiers of the Roman garrison were on guard in the streets. Hermas lost no time, but quickly making his way to a guardsman, hailed him with the words:

"Friend, I have but newly come from Rome. I bring thee greeting."

"In the name of Jove, I had rather see thee than the face of the fairest maiden in this accursed city," quickly responded the soldier.

Hermas brightened at this response of the guardsman, who continued with animation:

"But what brought thee from the fair city of Rome to Judaea? I would rather serve Augustus among the inhabitants of Gaul or the barbarians of Britain than among the fanatics of this priest-ridden land. The men are homesick and weary of it all. To go into battle would be a relief. But we are compelled to spend our days and nights in a monotonous round of petty duties, dealing with a people who, in their conceit, call us dogs. But why camest thou? Is it business, adventure or pleasure that brings thee? Come, tell me thy name, thy lineage, and give me news from Rome."

The soldier thus unburdened his heart to Hermas, and, taking him by the arm, drew him aside from the pressing throng to a quiet corner. He stood with his hand upon the shoulder of the youth, and gazed into his face as though they had always been friends.

"I have come," said Hermas with deep emotion, "seeking my father. He was sent to join the garrison in Jerusalem a year ago. We had one message soon after his arrival. We looked in vain for the second. My mother, frail of health, faded and died, leaving me alone in

the world. I sold what I possessed and have come in search of my father. My name is Hermas. My father's name was Junius, a trusted soldier of the palace guard while in Rome."

As Hermas mentioned the name of his father, the soldier placed an arm about him and drew him close in an affectionate embrace.

"And thou art the son of Junius!" he exclaimed. "I knew thy father. Junius was a man beloved by all the members of the garrison in Jerusalem."

"Tell me, tell me!" cried Hermas, trembling. "Do not keep me in suspense."

"Patience, son; thy father is not here."

The countenance of Hermas fell; his form wavered, but he recovered himself instantly, as the guardsman said reassuringly,

"But there is no reason for despair. Rumors of an insurrection in Babylonia required reinforcement of the legions stationed there, and thy father, with others from Judaea, was sent soon after his arrival in Jerusalem. The distance is long. Communication is difficult. A wide desert stretches between."

"My father may be alive, then?" ventured Hermas.

"He may be alive and may return at any time, as the detachment received orders to return to Judaea upon the completion of their commission. But be not deceived; the dangers are many. Thou knowest the disaster that befell the troops of Antony in other days. Deserted by barbarous allies, they retreated from Media, marching for twenty-seven days through a wasted country, pursued by the fierce Parthians and often in want of food and water. Twenty thousand footmen and four thousand horsemen perished and all the army train was lost before he reached the Araxes, on the Caspian Sea, and eight thousand more died before he came to Sidon, on the sea-coast."

"Better, by far, that he should have met death here in Jerusalem," said Hermas, "than to perish as did those men."

"Such is the fate of many of our bravest soldiers," replied the guardsman. "We serve a country that rules her subjects with an iron heel, but that heel is often battered. However, the present situation cannot be compared to that of Antony's day, when conflicts were raging in so many places. This is an era of peace. Rome is but guarding her interests on

the far frontiers. While there is room for apprehension, there is also good reason to believe that thy father will return ere long. If thou wilt tarry in Jerusalem thou shalt be my friend. Many in the garrison will wish to see thee and hear the latest news from Rome."

A feeling of mingled disappointment and hope filled the mind of Hermas at these words. The suspense which had been such a strain was broken. It would be better to accept the hospitality of this friendly soldier and to remain in Jerusalem for a reasonable time, awaiting the return of his father, than to attempt now the long caravan journey to Babylonia.

"Thy kindness is great, friend," said Hermas. "Not knowing what awaited me here, I made no further plans, and shall be relieved to accept thy invitation."

"The son of Junius is thrice welcome. Thou shalt not lack for friends or any means within the ability of the garrison in Jerusalem, and if, within the time allotted, thy father returns not, thou shalt be speeded on thy way with favor."

II

THE STREETS OF A STRANGE CITY

His mind thus at rest, Hermas became interested in the movements of the people about him. He noticed prevailing customs and characteristics widely different from those of his native city. But it could not be that the present attitude of the people was normal. There must be some unusual cause for this widespread excitement. Groups of people were standing about, speaking and gesticulating wildly, while the crowd increased in numbers each moment. Hermas noticed, not far away, a large, pompous man clothed in rich purple, with a high turban on his head. He spoke with an air of great authority. His voice rose above the tumult of the people. Quietness prevailed among those nearest him.

"I say that this rabble who know not the law are accursed!"

Hermas and his new friend became attentive as they watched the people gather about this strange personage.

"That is the Jewish high priest," said the guardsman in a low tone to Hermas. "He has more influence with the people than King Herod. He is the religious head of the Jewish

nation, and presides over the Sanhedrin, their highest tribunal. His arrogance and fanaticism know no bounds. He is constantly causing uprisings among his people against the Roman authority. Our soldiers must be on guard day and night."

"What is the occasion of the present excitement?" inquired Hermas.

"A matter that involves their religion, to be sure." replied the soldier. "Touch them ever so lightly at this point and you cause the greatest commotion. A very strange incident, however, has created the present stir."

The interest of Hermas deepened as the soldier explained:

"Yestereve, at the beginning of the first watch, there appeared in the city certain strange personages from the far East, men of wisdom and renown among their own people, who claimed that in their study of the heavens, —a study for which the men of the East have ever been famous,— they had seen a strange star in the direction of Judaea, and that, influenced by the general expectation in their land that a great monarch was to rise in Judaea to rule the world, they had followed the light of the star to Jerusalem to worship this new-

born king. They made known at once to the authorities the purpose of their mission. The news soon reached the ears of Herod, who called together all the chief priests and scribes, to learn, if possible, the place of the new king's birth. Thou knowest that Herod is king of Judaea by appointment of Caesar Augustus. He holds his petty throne precariously and is very superstitious. It is thought that he is holding a secret council at this very hour with these visitors from the East. He is a wary old fox, and means no good."

The soldier spoke with extraordinary grace and charm. The story itself was deeply interesting, but the fact that these men, wise and revered, had come from that far country whither his own heart was at present drawn, was of the greatest concern to Hermas.

The high priest was speaking to a crowd growing larger each moment. The Roman guardsmen on the outskirts of the throng were alert. Hermas noticed that his new friend was ready for any emergency that might arise. He was every inch a soldier and a man of unusual attractiveness. It was this that had led Hermas to approach him in the first place. The two were now near enough to the priest to hear him distinctly, and they paused to listen.

"To those not knowing the law it might seem that our fair Jerusalem, city of the Great King and pride of the nation, would be the place of the Messiah's birth. But it is not thus written in the prophets. Hear ye the prophet Micah."

He read from a scroll which had been given him by the scribe standing near his side,

"And thou Bethlehem, land of Judah, art in no wise least among the princes of Judah: for out of thee shall come forth a governor, who shall be shepherd of my people Israel."

He continued, as he gave back the scroll to his attendant:

"This is the prophecy which we read to King Herod in his palace last night. He is greatly troubled, as are many others, over the visit of these men from the East. But why should there be any alarm? There is no indication of the Messiah's birth. Why should it be thought that strangers of a despised nation from afar should come into the fold of Israel with knowledge not before communicated to the priests of Israel?"

The high priest paused, and from the crowd the voice of a woman was heard. "Is there not," she asked, "a prophecy in Isaiah that declares, 'The Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising'?"

"Woman," retorted the high priest, caustically, "there is such a prophecy, but it does not point to these vain dreamers. When the God of Israel is ready for the Messiah's birth, He will communicate the truth, unmistakably, to the guardians of our holy religion."

At the voice of the woman, Hermas had turned and beheld, close by him, an aged creature. Her hands were clasped, and upon her upturned face was an expression of devoutness and calm, that was unperturbed by the sharpness of the priest. In a voice that was heard only by those standing near, she said:

"Yea, it is written: 'The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall give presents; the kings of Arabia and Saba shall bring gifts.' Verily, the Lord is not confined in His doings to Israel."

"The prophetess Anna," whispered a man to his friend, so close that Hermas could hear. "She is never seen outside the Temple. Her presence in this crowd means that she is deeply stirred and feels some mighty significance."

At this moment there was a sudden commotion, and the crowd divided to make way for a group of elderly men who were descending the hill from the direction of Herod's

palace and were on their way towards the gate through which Hermas had entered the city.

"The visitors from the East!" exclaimed the guardsman to Hermas. "By all the gods, they are great men. Seest thou the dignity and firmness with which they walk, the light in their eyes and the wisdom on their faces? In truth, age with them has but graced form and feature."

"Whither are they bound?" asked Hermas with eager interest.

"The caravan which brought them," replied the guardsman, "halted outside the city gate, and they are returning thither to their temporary quarters where attendants are in waiting. It is whispered that they are very rich, and have brought from distant lands costly gifts for the child whom they seek."

Hermas thought of the words of Anna, as he watched the men pass out of the city gate. They were followed by a band of curious-minded folk among whom were many children, particularly boys, interested in any unusual sight. It was not curiosity, but a far deeper feeling that moved the heart of Hermas. He had seen in the faces of these men something that had cast a spell over him. Their benevo-

lent countenances, the strange light in their eyes, their whole demeanor, added to the things he had so recently heard, produced a deep desire in his heart to follow them and to learn, if possible, more about their strange mission.

"Fellow-Roman," said Hermas to the guardsman, "thou art a real friend to a lonely young man in a strange city. I thank thee for thy great kindness. I shall return to thee ere long, but meanwhile I shall follow these men. They move me deeply. Perchance, too, it will be well to make the acquaintance of men from the country to which my father is gone. Where shall I find thee?.....Pardon me, my friend, in the excitement I had quite forgot to ask thee thy name."

"My name is Cornelius," replied the guardsman. "If thou dost not find me here on guard, seek me at the headquarters of the garrison in the Tower of Antonia on yon hill. There thou wilt find something of the touch of Rome. Thou canst come and go at thy will."

Two furlongs outside the Damascus gate Hermas came upon the caravansary. It consisted of a large, unfurnished building surrounding a court, and was typical of those sta-

tions found along the routes of travel in the East, where caravans halted for the night. Here travellers from afar rested upon their arrival at Jerusalem, and from this point were begun journeys which extended to the far places of the earth. Hermas made his way into the court. Near the center the strangers were grouped in a circle. They were talking very earnestly in subdued tones. Hermas made salutation:

"Sirs, if you will pardon the intrusion, I would speak with you."

"Welcome, young friend, thrice welcome," came with one voice from the group, as they bowed low returning the salutation of Hermas. "Thy dress and manner," continued one, "denote that thou art a Roman. How long hast thou been in Jerusalem?"

Hermas told them that he had reached the city only an hour before, and that, seeing them pass as he was talking with a friend, he had desired to follow and make their acquaintance. He informed them of his purpose in visiting Jerusalem, and of his disappointment at not finding his father. They listened with the deepest attention to his sad story.

"Thou hast done well to come to us," they assured him, "if thou desirest to journey to the East. The way is long and there are many difficulties, but we will give thee help as the Father of Lights has illumined us."

"The chief glory of youth," replied Hermas, "is that it seeks the wisdom of age. I have depended upon my father, and dreamed not what his loss would mean until this venture. I am alone and I covet the wisdom that shines in your faces, which I saw even as you passed in the street."

"There is a wisdom, not of earth," they said, "that has guided us from afar. It comes from above. No wealth or station merits it; it is received only by the heart that is humble and open to the truth. We are advanced in years and will soon be gathered to our fathers, but the bloom of youth is upon thy brow and life holds much for thee. Gladly will we impart to thee knowledge of that which has come to crown our days, that thou, being unfettered, mayest devote thyself to its leading."

"I have already resolved," said Hermas, "to hold myself to the highest and to follow the light that shines upon my pathway. At present the way is uncertain. I know not what lies before me."

"Thou hast come with thy sorrow from the West," replied the Wise Men, "and we have come with a strange, new joy from the East. Our paths have converged here at Jerusalem where East and West are ever meeting. To-night when the stars come out we journey to Bethlehem, the birth-place of the Prince of Peace. From the far East, as, in our nightly vigils, we studied the heavens, we saw His Star lighting the western sky, and have come to worship Him, bringing our gifts. If thou wilt journey with us thou shalt travel in the light of that Star, and the peace of God shall fill thy soul."

III

A SECRET DEPARTURE

It was the hour of midnight. The little town of Bethlehem, facing the east from the high ridge upon which it was situated, was asleep. Only a few lights flickered here and there from homes on the terraced hillsides. In the clear light of the stars could be seen the hills of old Judaea, their shadowy forms rising high above the plains and almost breathing with life. Southward, the great wilderness reached away to the borders of Egypt. To the east lay the Dead Sea, and beyond, the Abarim Mountains with Nebo, Pisgah and Peor lifting their summits high above the land.

Outside the gate, at David's well, a caravan was hurriedly making ready for departure. There were movements of shadowy forms in the darkness. Men were speaking in subdued tones as they directed the watering of the camels and the filling of the large water-skins for the long journey ahead. Near the outskirts of the city, and moving cautiously on horseback, a solitary traveller was threading his way. Not far from the gate he reigned in his steed and listened intently until he

heard sounds from the direction of the well, and then proceeded with a sense of relief. He had gone but a few paces when he was met by one who had come from the direction of the well, and who, with great eagerness, accosted him:

"Is it thou, Cornelius?"

"Aye, Hermas; I have come with all haste."

"I feared, Cornelius, that thou wouldst not reach us in time. I knew the distance to Jerusalem was not long, but it was such a late hour when I dispatched the message. Thou hast made good time."

"Why hast thou called me, Hermas, at the midnight hour? What is the urgency that prompts this haste?" asked Cornelius, as he dismounted and came close to Hermas, placing a hand upon his shoulder.

"Thou knowest," replied Hermas, "that before leaving thee in Jerusalem to visit Bethlehem with the Wise Men, I told thee we would return and tell thee all. Herod held a secret meeting with these men, so they informed me after leaving Jerusalem. He directed them to go to Bethlehem and to seek the Babe, acting upon the information given him

by the priests in Jerusalem. He urged them to return to him after they had seen the Child, saying that he wished to come and worship Him. The Wise Men, who had been guided from their distant land by a star, waited until darkness fell, to make their way to Bethlehem. As we left the gate of Jerusalem for the south, lo! the star which they had seen in the East, went before us till it came and stood over where the young Child was. I shall never forget the joy that came to them when they again saw that star. I cannot tell thee the feelings that stirred my own heart. The glory of it all I can never express. Happy am I that my lot was cast with them.

"There was naught surrounding the Babe, like to the splendor of earthly princes, but the Wise Men say that He is to be king of all the world, but not after the fashion of earthly monarchs. His kingship is to rest upon his heavenly wisdom, and His authority upon truth. They read to me from one of the Hebrew sages whose writings have been treasured in their land since the captivity of the Jews in Babylon. Among many other things it was said that the Spirit of Jehovah should rest upon Him, the spirit of wisdom

and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of Jehovah. Righteousness should be the girdle of His waist, and faithfulness the girdle of His loins.

"The expectation of the Wise Men was confirmed by learning that before the birth of the Child the mother had seen the angel Gabriel, who declared that as a virgin, under the power of the Holy Spirit, she should bear a Son and call His name Jesus and that He should be great, even the son of the Most High, and that of His kingdom there should be no end. It was further learned that upon the night of His birth in a manger, a multitude of angels appeared to some shepherds attending their flocks outside the city of Bethlehem, and sang a wonderful chorus of praise to the great God who had sent His son to be the Saviour and Prince of men and to bring peace to all the world. These sages from the East opened their treasures and presented the Babe with costly presents,—gold and frankincense and myrrh. I had no gift to bring, but I did Him homage and resolved that henceforth my life should be committed to His cause."

"In truth thy story moves me deeply," said Cornelius. "It contains more reality than the fables and auguries of Rome; and, indeed, there is need of such a king to rule the world. I have oft felt that the fancies created by the desire of the human mind for unseen and eternal things do but argue the existence of something that must be real. If there be a greater than Jove or Zeus, why should he not reveal himself to men? Perchance the good God has come down to dwell with men."

"Thy words," replied Hermas, "do but increase my joy, for I would share with thee the faith which the sages have communicated to me. And thy response doth confirm the declaration of the Wise Men that everywhere the hearts of men are expectant and eager for the fulfillment of that which is written in the ancient lore of the prophets of Judah."

"I have more faith," responded Cornelius, "that such an event should occur here in the quiet of Bethlehem among the lowly than in Jerusalem with the strutting priests who have corrupted what might have been pure in their religion. But what is there, Hermas, in this quiet event to cause excitement at the midnight hour, and why this sudden departure?"

"There is necessity," answered Hermas. "It was the plan of the Wise Men to leave early on the morrow for Jerusalem and to bring news of the Babe to Herod, as he had requested. Early to-night they lay down to sleep. I was lying near them, but because of the stirring scenes that have filled my mind during these eventful days, I could not sleep. The Wise Men, with a sense of calm and peace, slept as soundly as the Babe in Its mother's arms. Suddenly, Cornelius, a light began to gleam in the room, like the glory of Orion as he steadily mounts the heavens. It grew to the likeness of moonlight upon a calm sea and increased to the brightness of the rising sun upon the snowy summit of Hermon or Olympus or Parnassus. In its dazzling whiteness it remained until its glory enraptured my being, and then died softly away as it had begun. The Wise Men wakened from sleep and exclaimed together that they had seen the vision of an angel. The angel had brought a message. They must not return to Herod, but depart by another route for their own land.

"Therefore they are making all haste to get out of the country before the crafty king sus-

pects their plan. I journey with them. Before the sun rises we shall be well on our way by a secret route. Herod has determined evil against the Babe. He will carry out his purpose if possible. Do thou, Cornelius, when we are gone, give the little family every aid in thy power. If they flee, as flee they must, do thou give them secret help."

"I pledge thee, Hermas, I will do even as thou requestest. But why dost thou leave Jerusalem when thy father may return in thy absence?"

"Cornelius," exclaimed Hermas, with profound joy, "I have yet a wonderful story to tell thee, but the caravan is now ready and I must not detain them. I will be brief.

"The story came unexpectedly as a lost pearl is suddenly found. The Wise Men had worshiped the Babe and withdrawn to their quarters with a sense of supreme satisfaction over the success of their mission. They conversed more freely than before. They expressed the conviction that the heavenly wisdom which had guided their footsteps aright would ever lead them during the remaining days of their earthly pilgrimage. It was then that I ventured the hope of such a wisdom guiding me

in quest of my father. My words brought from one of the men who had been silently gazing into my face, a question. 'Is there aught in thy features,' he inquired, 'that resembles thy father?'

"'It is said by friends in Rome,' I replied, 'that I am the image of my father.' My surprise and interest at his question deepened at the brightening of his face and the peculiar joy it shed.

"'I may now say,' he went on, 'what I have believed since thou didst first enter the caravansary at Jerusalem, but what I have delayed to express until becoming more sure, for I did not wish to convey a false hope. Upon one of my visits to a prison in Babylonia I saw a Roman soldier who had been wounded and captured by the enemy. Other prisoners were there, and I tried to bring cheer to all. But there was something in the face of this man particularly to attract and draw me to him. I conversed with him and he told me of his home in Rome. He spoke of wife and son. I procured his freedom and placed him in quarters safe and comfortable. Attendants were instructed to care for all his needs. Sufficient means were left to pay all expenses, with the

promise that I would return. I told him that he must not leave until he see my face again. Soon afterwards I left with my companions to follow the Star. On the way to our land beyond the Euphrates we shall visit his abode. Thou, son, canst journey as our guest, without expense to thyself, and thy father himself wilt greet thee.' "

When Hermas had finished these words, he placed his arms around Cornelius and kissed him. In the starlight tears glistened in his eyes and fell on the shoulder of Cornelius where he had laid his head. Cornelius was too deeply moved to speak.

"I go," continued Hermas, "to meet my father, and I journey with a sorrow that will smite him again, but I also carry a new joy which will bind up his broken heart,—even the joy of the new-born King. We leave Judaea in the darkness of night, but we travel in the light of the Star that has arisen in our hearts. To all who worship the Babe, the Star ever shines and the angels ever sing their song of peace and good-will. When I have found my father we shall return to Jerusalem and see thee again. Henceforth life is rich in meaning. My purpose reaches out to all mankind. Fare thee well."

IV

A FRIEND IN THE DARK

Slowly the great beasts, rocking like ships at sea, moved out into the shadows. Cornelius gazed after them until they were swallowed up by the darkness. Alone with his thoughts beneath the silent stars he could almost hear the beating of his own heart. The experiences of the last few days, culminating in the events of the midnight hour, had strangely moved him. Into the monotony of his routine life as a Roman guardsman had come the spell of a winsome hope. He would pursue it with all the strength of his life. His first thought was of the infant Child and Its parents. His effort to protect them as Hermas had requested must be performed with great caution. He would visit them secretly during the still hours of the night and bring them warning and friendly assistance.

For Cornelius to think was to act. Obedience was the law of his life as a soldier. But now he had received a more urgent command. The request of Hermas was also the voice of his own conscience, upon which the light of the Star had fallen. In a secluded corner not

far from the gate of the city he secured his horse. As he turned his steps towards the entrance, the sound of an animal's hoof on the rocks reached his ears. He paused and gazed through the darkness. Vaguely he discerned the outlines of an object moving in his direction. As it approached, he saw the beast widely used in Judaea for travel, upon which sat a woman folding a babe to her breast. A man with staff in hand walked by her side to support her and guide the beast.

"Some belated peasants returning to their home in the country," thought Cornelius. "I will at least greet them."

At sight of the soldier the man and woman recoiled as though struck by a blow. Even in the darkness Cornelius saw a look of terror in their faces. The woman drew the babe closer to her breast; the man clutched his staff and moved a step in advance of the woman.

His knowledge of recent events and the very quest upon which he was now bent, caused Cornelius to recognize at once the presence of the family he was seeking.

"Fear not," said Cornelius, reassuringly. "To assist you on your way, not to arrest your progress, am I here. I have seen the Wise

Men. The youth who journeys with them is my friend. They were warned of God in a dream not to return to Herod, and have just departed by another way to their own land. I promised to befriend you. I have seen the light of the Star."

At this unexpected message from the soldier, the two became calm; their fear was turned into joy; an expression of relief came over their faces.

"God be praised," exclaimed the man; "surely He will protect the Child according to His promise."

"Your God must have guided me to this place for this hour," replied Cornelius. "I was but finding my way secretly in the dark to your lodging to offer what assistance I might render. Whither wilt thou go with the Babe?"

"Into Egypt," answered the man. "I, too, have had a dream this night, in which the angel of the Lord warned me to take the mother and Child and flee thither, for Herod will seek the Child to destroy Him."

"Strange are the experiences surrounding the birth of my Babe," said the mother, with a sweet, sad voice. "There was no room in the inn at Bethlehem after our long, weary journey from Nazareth. Our only lodging was

with the beasts. When but newly born, He was wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in a manger as His first resting-place. And now we must flee for His safety into a strange land. Verily, this Babe is for the rising and falling of many in Israel. I see before us lights and shadows, thorns as well as roses, yea, a sword to pierce my heart. But high over all is the will and purpose of the Most High."

She ceased and, raising the face of the sleeping Babe to her own, implanted there a kiss with all the affection of the mother-heart.

"Wilt thou journey without further preparation?" asked Cornelius.

"Yea," responded the man; "we must travel by night and hide by day until we pass beyond the borders of Judaea, the dominion of Herod."

"Art thou known in Egypt,—dost thou have friends?"

"Nay, but the Lord will provide; as a shepherd for his sheep, He will go before and prepare the way. His providence hath already been manifested. He directed the Wise Men with their gifts. They have left us costly treasures. The gold may be used as we journey; the frankincense and myrrh of the East

will be of most value in Egypt, where an easy exchange may be made,—but we must journey on, using well the few remaining hours of this night."

"Wilt thou grant me the blessing of walking with thee on the first stage of the journey?" asked Cornelius.

"Verily, thy presence will be both security and comfort in the uncertainty of this night," he replied, with gladness.

"It will be as the peace of the Eternal to me," exclaimed Cornelius, as he took his place opposite Joseph by the side of the beast.

As the little company moved forward, the mother adjusted her position to the slow movement of the beast. Disturbed in its slumber near her heart, the Babe stirred and gave a low cry. The mother pressed it closer to her breast, and with a soft, sweet voice that fell with exquisite music upon the still night air, began what seemed to Cornelius a lullaby. He had never heard such words. The impression upon his soul was such that when long years had passed he could repeat them as they were murmured by the mother that night under the silent stars. And these were

the words she sang,—the words that have been sung in all ages since:

"My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
For he hath looked upon the low estate of his handmaid:
For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;
And holy is his name.
And his mercy is unto generations and generations
On them that fear him.
He hath showed strength with his arm;
He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their heart.
He hath put down princes from their thrones,
And hath exalted them of low degree.
The hungry he hath filled with good things;
And the rich he hath sent empty away.
He hath given help to Israel his servant,
That he might remember mercy
(As he spake unto our fathers)
Toward Abraham and his seed forever."

Day was dawning over the hills of Moab when toilers from Bethlehem, going forth to the field saw a Roman soldier slowly making his way on foot towards the city. He refreshed himself at the well of Bethlehem, where shepherds were watering their flocks. He was seen to mount a handsome steed waiting near the gate and to ride off towards Jerusalem, and more than one noted on his face an expression of peace unusual in the haughty Romans who had come to hold them in subjection.

V

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

As the lowly pilgrims cautiously made their way towards the land of the Nile, and the caravan of the Wise Men steadily moved across the burning sands of the desert to those fertile plains which had been the earliest home of humanity, a lonely man sat in the cottage of a Babylonian peasant, overlooking the Euphrates. There were marks of suffering upon his face. Slowly he was finding his way back to health. With returning strength his mind became more active. Memory stirred within him thoughts of other days that almost overwhelmed him. Hope revived, and with it, the purpose to face bravely whatever the future might hold.

How strange his way had been. Cut off from communication with his native land so far away across the desert and the sea, wounded, captured by enemies, and left to languish and die in a horrible prison,—and yet from it all he had been rescued in a way so strange and unbelievable. One day when the tides of his life had ebbed very low, a kindly form had bent over him and whispered a message of

love. The prison doors were opened; he was tenderly carried forth into the light. Since that day there had lived in his mind the picture of a kind old man who not only had delivered him from prison by means of a ransom, but had placed him with those who were nursing him back to health. The old man had given money, and had promised to return. He longed to see that face again. It had been like a burst of sunshine in the dark.

What manner of man, he asked himself, was this to stoop to him in his misfortune? Who was it that would care for a Roman soldier in the land where his presence was despised? It was true that Rome was the proud mistress of the world, but she had acquired her dominion and glory at the price of vast numbers of her soldiers who had perished, as he might have done, without pity. Cut off from their native land, they had fallen on every battlefield of the world. Was not force the great principle of life? Why should the strong consider the weak? Stranger still, why should the conquered consider his conqueror? Yet this man, member of the subdued race which he had come to hold in subjection, had rescued him from death and had done so as a friend might have done, without promise or hope of reward.

This was something altogether new to Junius. It was the subject of his reflections during the long days and nights of his convalescence, and as he pondered, gradually he came to see a higher principle than that of force. Daily, from the doorway of his dwelling by the river, he had looked upon the forces of nature at work. There was force in the tempest that shook the world, a force that uprooted and destroyed; there was a higher power in the sunshine that, without shock or noise, gladdened the earth and caused it to smile and yield its harvests. There was force in the volume of the river that sometimes overflowed its banks, a force that left destruction in its wake; there was a higher power for good in the quiet streams that were turned aside to water the desert places and make them fruitful. The warfare of Rome was like the tempest and the river, coming with fury and destruction. The influence of the good man upon his life had been as the sunshine and the quiet streams upon the desert around him, which was even now beginning to blossom in the radiance of springtime.

Through it all Junius, representative of a government of force, came to see the working

of a higher law, the law of love. And as he reflected he came to see that such a law was stronger than death and must survive it. Working silently and unseen, it neither had its beginning in this world, nor would it end here. Love was the higher life and must have its abode beyond the fleeting years of time.

Such was the course of his reasoning. He longed for the return of the good man that he might converse with him about these thoughts that stirred the depths of his being. The light that had come to him was worth infinitely more than he had paid of darkness and pain. If out of his sorrow had come such joy, he did not regret his experience. How rich the world would be if men everywhere could possess the key to life which the good man held!

From such thoughts as these he was aroused at the twilight of a bright day by the sound of voices and many footsteps near his dwelling. The quietness of his seclusion, so long undisturbed, but now thus broken, caused him to start with apprehension. What could this mean? The next moment there stood in the doorway the form that for many days had lived in his mind. The good man had returned. In his face shone the law of kindness and its

114278

brightness was greater than before. As Junius with extra effort tried to rise from his seat, the old man advanced and placed his right hand upon his shoulder.

"Stay, good Friend," he said; "do not rise, the effort is too much for thee."

"Ah, messenger of love," replied Junius, "thy coming again has satisfied my longing. Through the weary days I have waited to look into thy face, once more to learn, if possible, the secret of thy life."

"I return to thee," responded the Wise Man, "with a hope that will answer every desire of thy heart; but first, there is another story to relate."

And then with great care he gently prepared the mind of Junius for the surprise which, coming too suddenly, would have been a severer ordeal. At the right moment Hermas appeared. His face, fair and handsome as his father had last seen it, was now bronzed by the fierce light and the parching winds of the long journey across the desert; once smooth, it was now bearded, and his native costume had been laid aside for the coarser garments of desert travel. Altogether his appearance was quite unlike that of other days

in his native Rome, but he had grown in strength and carried himself with a grace that distinguished him.

For a brief moment the father gazed upon the form of his son, and when the full realization of the presence of Hermas came to him, he gave a low cry and sank back into the seat from which he had half raised himself. Hermas was beside him, his left arm around him and his right hand stroking his forehead. The Wise Man stood over them with tender devotion. At length Junius revived and quietly looked up into the face of Hermas.

"And it is Hermas, my own Hermas!" he whispered. "What brought thee? How camest thou so far, my Son?"

"Rest, Father, quietly rest and I will tell thee all."

In that moment the Wise Man silently withdrew that the two might be alone with their joy and their sorrow. On the outside he joined his companions, and together they gazed into the west where the setting sun had left a golden pathway in the sky.

"Our ancestors from ancient years have worshipped the sun and the heavenly bodies," he exclaimed, at length breaking the silence, "but

thanks to the Most High, we have been led to know the Creator of all the host of the heavens. As it is written in the wisdom of Job, it is He that stretcheth out the heavens; that maketh the Bear with her train, Orion, and the Pleiades; that maketh the chambers of the South; that stretcheth out the North over empty space, and hangeth the earth upon nothing. Yea, by His Spirit the heavens are garnished. And now the day-spring from on high hath visited the earth. All the rays of heavenly light are converging in yon Babe of Judaea, Whose brightness will grow until all the earth is lighted with a glory surpassing the light of the setting sun."

And the Wise Man with his companions bowed low to the earth and worshipped.

That evening Junius and Hermas occupied the center of a circle formed by the Wise Men. They sat and communed late into the night, for it was to be their last evening together. On the morrow they would depart to their own land far beyond the river and the reaches of the desert. As they talked a stream of light brought to the mind of Junius confirmation of all his deepest convictions. The sorrow over his great loss was a stroke made endurable only

through the hope thus confirmed. Hermas, whose presence was like the dawn to his spirit, would remain with him until he was strong enough to travel. The Wise Men out of their munificence promised to provide for all needs until a new beginning could be made. A fairer day was upon them. They would live for the new faith which the light of the Star had brought. And if the reflection of that light as seen in the faces and lives of the Wise Men was so entrancing, what must the radiance be in the face of Him whose Star had been seen by the watchers in the East. In due time they would journey back to Judaea where they hoped to find Cornelius and, with him, seek the face of the Holy Child.

So, by the waters of that ancient River which in the beginning flowed through Eden, the men from the East and the men from the West, bound by indissoluble ties, bowed and worshipped the Spirit unconfined,—worshipped with thought of the Infant Child who, that moment, by the waters of another River in far away Egypt, was peacefully breathing in slumber undisturbed, on the breast of His mother.

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